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Reading test element reviewed

Passage might be misconstrued out of its historic context

OLYMPIA – A book passage used to help test students’ reading skills in this year’s Washington Assessment of Student Learning will not be used in future versions of the test, said Washington Superintendent of Public Instruction Terry Bergeson.

“After review, I recognize that the passage should not have been part of the test without the historic context in which it takes place,” Bergeson said.

Students taking the reading WASL were asked to answer questions based on their reading of an excerpt from “Breaking Through,” the second in a two-book fictionalized memoir written by Francisco Jimenez, an award-winning author and professor of modern languages at Santa Clara University. (Excerpt is attached.)

Review of the excerpt was prompted by reports that a 10th grade student had complained that he found the passage offensive to him as a Latino. The unidentified student’s complaint was forwarded to OSPI and the Governor’s Office by a group identified as the Parent Empowerment Network.

The passage, which recounts Jimenez’ youth as the son of migrant workers in the 1950s, makes reference to farm workers wages and their relationships with the property owners for whom they work. The excerpt’s timeframe is not made clear in the test booklet, so, Bergeson said, it would be possible for students to see it as a story set in present day.

The 2001 book is the winner of the Pura Belpré Award, presented to a Latino/Latina writer and illustrator “whose work best portrays, affirms and celebrates the Latino cultural experience in an outstanding work of literature for youth and children.”

Because of the controversy and the need to be sensitive to the concerns of the Latino community, and because the excerpt has now been widely distributed, the passage and associated questions will not be used in future WASL writing tests.

In addition, OSPI officials will review the scoring of this year’s reading test for any signs of disproportionate impacts from the questions related to the excerpt on the scores of Latino students. If such impacts are detected, those questions could be dropped from the exam. In that case, all students would be assessed on the remainder of the reading section.

All questions selected for the WASL are first screened for bias and sensitivity by a diverse panel of Washington residents. As a result of that review, an introductory statement was added to the Jimenez passage, explaining that “In this excerpt from *Breaking Through*, the author chronicles his experiences as the son of migrant workers.”

“Even after such review,” Bergeson said, “it’s possible that someone might find a passage or question insensitive to a particular group or culture. We appreciate that prospect being brought to our attention and commend the young man being quoted for having the pride and courage to step forward and challenge our sensitivity as adults and educators.”

Bergeson added that her office would continue to encourage the development of WASL test questions that are culturally relevant and culturally sensitive.

About OSPI

The Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) is the primary agency charged with overseeing K-12 education in Washington state. Led by State School Superintendent Dr. Terry Bergeson, OSPI works with the state’s 296 school districts and nine Educational Service Districts to administer basic education programs and implement education reform on behalf of more than one million public school students. For more information, visit the OSPI Web site at <http://www.k12.wa.us>.